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ABSTRACT

Grade inflation has commanded increasing attention in the academic world in recent years, with administrators, faculty, and academic analysts unable to agree on whether grade inflation actually exists or is a myth to be debunked. This Digest reviews research in support of and against the existence of grade inflation. A statistical analysis report by the U.S. Department of Education found that student grades have actually declined slightly over the last 20 years, but other researchers have found evidence supporting the existence of grade inflation and have linked it with various causes. (SLD)

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Carol Young

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Grade Inflation in Higher Education
by Carol Young

Introduction
The phenomenon of grade inflation has commanded increasing attention in the academic world for more than 15 years. College and university administrators, faculty, and academic analysts do not agree on whether grade inflation actually exists, or whether it is a myth to be debunked. Among those factions that do agree that grade inflation exists in higher education, there is often disagreement on its root causes and its correlative factors.

Grade Inflation Defined
What is grade inflation? According to a 1995 paper entitled "Indicators of Grade Inflation," presented by Robert Mullen, then an associate analyst in the Office of Planning and Budget at the University of Missouri, grade inflation is defined as "... when a grade is viewed as being less rigorous than it ought to be" (Mullen, 1995, p29). Generally, grade inflation can be described as a practice among universities and colleges to deflate the actual, real value of an A, so that it becomes an average grade among college and university students.

Arguments against its existence
Clifford Adelman, a senior research analyst with the U.S. Department of Education, reviewed student transcripts from more than 3,000 colleges and universities and reported in 1995 that student grades have actually declined slightly over the last 20 years (Kohn, 2002).

In its statistical analysis report, *Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Institutions: 1999-2000*, the National Center for Education Statistics, states that a study of 16.5 million graduates from 1999-2000 showed that 14.5% of these students received mostly A's, while 33.5% received a grade of C or lower.

In another study completed by Indiana University's George D. Kuh and Shouping Hu (1999), *Unraveling the Complexity of the Increase in College Grades From the Mid-1980's to the Mid-1990's*, grade inflation is called a "widespread, though not necessarily uniform, phenomenon." Kuh and Hu evaluated grades in cohorts of undergraduates in the 1980s and 1990s, controlling for background characteristics, institutional characteristics, major field, and academic efforts. They found that undergraduate grades increased across different types of institutions and major fields and that the increases varied in magnitude and had different causal factors. Evidence of grade inflation was found only at selective liberal arts colleges and research universities. The study found grade *deflation* at general liberal arts colleges and comprehensive colleges and universities, and in the humanities and social sciences. The researchers also found that students' academic effort was rewarded consistently across time at all institutions and across all majors, with students who studied more reporting higher grades (Kuh & Hu, 1999).

A study at the University of Missouri suggests that the increase in the grade point averages of freshmen with like abilities and credit hour loads were distributed normally from the years 1987 - 1992. The increase was not greater than predicted, given the increases in the incoming students' average ACT composite scores and class rank (Mullen, 1995).

Arguments for its existence
Other professionals, academic researchers, and professors believe that grade inflation exists and cite myriad factors and historical evidence as proof. In the 2002 American Academy of Arts & Sciences report, *Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing? Grade Inflation and Letters of Recommendation*, Henry Rosovsky and Matthew Harley combine the findings of a series of discussions on the trend of grade inflation. The researchers argue that grade inflation began in the 1960s and 1970s with sympathetic faculty helping students to avoid the draft by assigning them higher scores and assuring their place in the University. Other possible factors they suggested include increased expectation among students for higher grades as a result of steep tuition fees and a competitive job market that demands top-performing graduates, better professor evaluations linked to better grades assigned to students, the "watering down" of course content, and the pressure on overtaxed faculty to maintain the status quo of high student grade point averages.

In *Grade Inflation: A Crisis in College Education (2003)*, professor Valen E. Johnson concludes that disparities in grading affect the way students complete course evaluation forms and result in inequitable faculty evaluations. He found that students were less likely to

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enroll in classes or electives, usually math and science, in which it was more likely they would earn lower grades, and that unregulated grading penalizes students who enroll in demanding courses. Students are currently able to manipulate their grade point averages through the judicious choice of their classes rather than through moderating their efforts. Academic standards have been diminished and this diminution can be halted, he argues, only if more principled student grading practices are adopted and if faculty evaluations become more closely linked to student achievement.

Further reading about grade inflation in higher education:

Adelman, C. (2001, Winter). Putting on the glitz: How tales from a few elite institutions form America's impressions about higher education. *New England Board of Higher Education*, 24-30.

Basinger, D. (1997). Fighting grade inflation: A misguided effort? *College Teaching, v. 45, no. 3*, 88-91.

Beaver, W. (1997). Declining college standards: It's not the courses, it's the grades. *The College Board Review, no. 181*, 2-7, 29.

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Marcus, J. (2002, Summer). High marks: Mounting evidence of "grade inflation" across the country. *National Crosstalk, vol. 10, no. 3*. On the journal's website at http://www.highereducation.org/crosstalk/ct0302/news0702-high_marks.shtml

Wilson, B. (2003). *The phenomenon of grade inflation in higher education*. On the Association of American Educators website at http://www.aaeteachers.org/gradeinflation.htm

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Kohn, A. (2002, Nov. 8). The dangerous myth of grade inflation. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Downloaded October 14, 2003 from http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/gi.htm

Kuh, G. & Hu, S. (1999, Fall). Unraveling the complexity of the increase in college grades from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, v. 21, no. 3*, 297-320.

Rosovsky, H. & Hartley, M. (2002). *Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing? Grade Inflation and Letters of Recommendation*. Cambridge, MA: The American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Downloaded October 14 from http://www.amacad.org/publications/monographs/Evaluation_and_the_Academy.pdf

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